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Australian War Graves Workers and World War One

Devoted Labour for the
Lost, the Unknown but
not Forgotten Dead

Fred Cahir · Sara Weuffen ·
Matt Smith · Peter Bakker ·
Jo Caminiti

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FOREWORD

If one visits the former battlefields of the Great War today, the most obvious signs of its devastating presence are the cemeteries. Especially on the Western Front, those cemeteries—some small, some vast—unfold before the visitor, giving a sense of the movement of battle and the intensity of the destruction of human life that occurred there a century ago.

These are peaceful places, well-groomed and cared for still. But as much as these places reveal, they also conceal. The chaos, the pain and so often the indignity of death on those battlefields is obscured by its recreation in clean and orderly cemeteries. One can read that reconstruction both as an effort to deny the reality of death on the battlefield, and at the same time as a determination to console hearts wounded by the loss of those they loved.

By whose hands was that effort at consolation made? For Australians as for all those in the British Empire the care of the dead had to be entrusted to others. This book reminds us that the care of the dead was the work of real people who felt their obligations keenly, struggled with the heavy reality of their task, and sought various forms of refuge from its demands.

In rendering the human face and feeling of that poignant commission, the authors of this volume have rendered their own service. They

remind us that between the realities of death and its remaking in peaceful cemeteries lay human labour. Even as they served those longing hearts in Australia, for those who remained once the fighting had stopped that labour came with its own burdens and costs.

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PREFACE

This book relays the largely untold story of the approximately 1100 Australian war graves workers—comprised of the Australian Graves Detachment (AGD) and the Australian Graves Service (AGS) operating in Europe after World War 1 (WW1) from 1919–1922. It does this by presenting biographical vignettes of eight men who undertook this work. In exploring the Australian war graves workers, the book examines the mechanics of commemorating the Great War and extends our understanding of the individual toll this onerous task took on the workers themselves. The book is timely given the post-commemoration period into which we are now heading.

This book will be of special interest to people interested in Australia's WW1 history, in particular, aspects of commemoration and grieving associated with the post-WWI period (1919–1922). Biographical representations, and stories told by direct descendants encourage wider general readership by those fascinated with the lived realities of a small selection of the 1100 Australian war graves workers who intimately “knew all its associations and tragedies” from the battlefield to the graveyard.¹

Ballarat, Australia
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Brisbane, Australia
Langwarrin, Australia
Cowwarr, Australia

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¹Lieutenant Lee in Bart Ziino, *A Distant Grief: Australians, War Graves and the Great War* (Crawley: University of Western Australian Press, 2007), 96.

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We acknowledge Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders as Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters of the Australian continent and surrounding islands. We acknowledge and pay our respects to their Elders, past, and present.

We are very appreciative of the support we have received from the descendants of Frank Cahir and William McBeath, two of the Australian graves workers who feature in this book.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

The book begins with a discussion of the ideological motivations for the inception and technological advancement of war graves work during the first two decades of the twentieth century. It then explores the general living and working conditions of the Australian Graves Detachment (AGD) in Western Europe (predominately in France and Belgium) as they undertook the necessary, yet gruesome, tasks of transforming bloodied and devastated terrain into peaceful and revered sites of mourning.

NOMENCLATURE

A variety of names and acronyms surround Australia's contribution to the war graves effort post-WWI, including the Australian Graves Detachment (AGD), the Graves Registration Unit (GRU), and Graves Registration Service (AGS). While this book offers some clarity regarding certain operational and locational aspects of some of these various groups, it does not aim to comprehensively address this issue. However, to ensure consistency across the book, the authors have chosen to reference the AGD in general, unless otherwise specified by a primary resource, as a means of connecting to the wider Australian war graves effort post-WWI.

CONTENTS

1	“Their Last Resting Place”: Foundations of Graves Work	1
	Sara Weuffen and Fred Cahir	
	<i>Introduction</i>	1
	<i>Evolution of Modern War Graves Practices</i>	2
	<i>The Imperial War Graves Commission (IWGC) (1914–1918)</i>	6
	<i>Conclusion</i>	8
2	The Australian War Graves Effort (1919–1922)	11
	Sara Weuffen and Fred Cahir	
	<i>Introduction</i>	11
	<i>Australia’s Promise</i>	12
	<i>The Graves Registration Unit (GRU) at Gallipoli (1918–1919)</i>	16
	<i>The Australian Graves Detachment (AGD) on the Western Front (1919)</i>	18
	<i>The Australian Graves Service (AGS) on the Western Front (1919–1922)</i>	30
	<i>Conclusion</i>	32
3	“A Man of Silent Substance”: Major John Eldred Mott MC	37
	Matt Smith	
	<i>Introduction</i>	38
	<i>Active Service</i>	38

	<i>The Gallant Australian</i>	40
	<i>Commanding Officer of the AGD</i>	44
	<i>Negotiating a Delicate Balance</i>	45
	<i>Cornerstone of a Commanding Officer</i>	47
	<i>A Commanding Legacy</i>	51
4	“He Took Pleasure in Doing His Duty”: Staff Sgt. Frank Cahir DSM, MM	55
	Fred Cahir	
	<i>Introduction</i>	55
	<i>Wartime Service</i>	56
	<i>“One of Those Choice-Drawn Cavaliers”</i>	59
	<i>Frank’s War Graves Work</i>	60
	<i>Return to Australia</i>	66
	<i>Physical and Emotional Troubles</i>	67
	<i>PTSD Fallout</i>	68
5	“Dark in Complexion”: The Indigenous War Graves Workers	75
	Peter Bakker and Fred Cahir	
	<i>Introduction</i>	76
	<i>Private 6524 Edward “Darky” Smith</i>	78
	<i>Wartime Service</i>	78
	<i>No. 1 Company AGD Worker</i>	80
	<i>Private 7515 William Charles Miller</i>	84
	<i>Private 5386 George William Mitchell</i>	86
	<i>Private 7114 John “Jack” Ogilvie</i>	88
6	“A Credible Officer Befallen by Circumstance?” Captain Allen Charles Waters Kingston	95
	Matt Smith	
	<i>Introduction</i>	96
	<i>Enlistment and WWI-Service</i>	96
	<i>AGD and AGS Motor Transport and Photographic Unit CO</i>	102
	<i>Questionable Leadership?</i>	103
	<i>Judged and Found Lacking</i>	107
	<i>Returning Home</i>	108

7	“A Very Unpleasant Job”: Private William Frampton McBeath	111
	Jo Caminiti	
	<i>My Grandfather’s Story</i>	111
	<i>Private 61661 William (Will) Frampton McBeath</i>	112
	<i>The Last Convoy</i>	112
	<i>Spanish Influenza</i>	115
	<i>Armistice</i>	116
	<i>England</i>	116
	<i>France</i>	117
	<i>Australian Graves Detachment</i>	119
	<i>Gay Paree</i>	122
	<i>Going Home</i>	123
8	Their Legacy	129
	Sara Weuffen and Fred Cahir	
	<i>Introduction</i>	129
	<i>Contributions to Wartime Literature</i>	131
	<i>Significance to (Inter)National Pilgrimage</i>	134
	<i>The Australian Graves Detachment’s (AGD) Legacy</i>	135

ABBREVIATIONS

AGD	Australian Graves Detachment
AGS	Australian Graves Service
AIF	Australian Imperial Force
ANZAC	Australian and New Zealand Army Corps
AWM	Australian War Memorial
BEF	British Expeditionary Force
Capt.	Captain
CO	Commanding Officer
DCM	Distinguished Conduct Medal
GOC	General Officer Commanding/General Officer in Charge
GRC	Graves Registration Commission
GRU	Graves Registration Unit
HQ	Headquarters
IWGC	Imperial War Graves Commission
Lt-Col	Lieutenant Colonel
MBE	Member of the Order of the British Empire Medal
MC	Military Cross
MM	Military Medal
OG	Old German Line
POW	Prisoner of War
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
VD	Venereal Disease
WO	Warrant Officer
WWI	World War One
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association

LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 1.1	Battlefield graves on the Silt Spur, Gallipoli, 1915 (AWM image https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C1014301)	4
Fig. 2.1	Lieutenant Hughes with Sergeant Woolley marking out graves at Brown's Dip (1919) (AWM image https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C382446)	17
Fig. 2.2	AGD shoulder patches (Made of a scarlet flannel material and worn under soldier's original unit colour patches with the different shapes representing the following: Rectangle = Graves Detachment; Triangle = Officer, Motor Transport Company; Circle = No. 4 Motor Transport Company. AWM25, No. 89/8. The illustrated Australian War Graves Detachment colour patches were fabricated by the staff of the Australian War Memorial following military instructions given in June 1919. Photographs sourced from AWM Accession number REL26967, https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C359824 ; AWM Accession number REL26968, https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C359825 ; and AWM Accession number REL26969, https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C359826)	19
Fig. 2.3	Members of an Australian graves unit digging individual graves in local cemetery Bertangles, France, 1918 (AWM image https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C273974)	21
Fig. 2.4	Informal portrait of the Horse Transport Section of the AGD near billets (AWM image https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C976176)	22

Fig. 2.5	Australian Graves Detachment (AGD) and Australian Graves Service (AGS) areas of responsibility on the Western Front	23
Fig. 2.6	Exhumed bodies of Australian soldiers, exhumed, wrapped, and awaiting reburial (AWM image https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C339996)	25
Fig. 2.7	French children tending graves of Australians at Adelaide Cemetery, late 1918 (https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C1380)	27
Fig. 2.8	Red Chateau, Villers-Bretonneux (1919) (https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C971074)	28
Fig. 3.1	Portrait of Lieutenant Colonel John Eldred Mott (AWM image https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C73740)	39
Fig. 3.2	The exterior of an old German dugout, Mouquet Farm (AWM image https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C451311)	41
Fig. 3.3	Informal portrait of AGD workers with Miss Ettie Rout, venereal disease campaigner (AWM image https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C971026)	46
Fig. 3.4	AGD Guard of Honour Amiens 1919 (AWM image https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C971014)	49
Fig. 3.5	YMCA with Venn-Brown and Captain A.C.W. Kingston (2nd from right) (AWM image https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C971044)	50
Fig. 4.1	Conflict grave marked with wooden cross, rifle, and helmet, 1918	62
Fig. 4.2	Australian graves workers preparing exhumed bodies for reburial in nearby cemetery (1919)	63
Fig. 5.1	Aboriginal servicemen of the AGD	77
Fig. 5.2	Group portrait of AGD members, including Edward “Darkie” Smith, 9th Battalion (seated) (AWM image https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C1264668)	79
Fig. 5.3	[Excerpt] Group portrait of No. 1 Company of the AGD at Warfusse-Abancourt, France, 26 July 1919. Edward “Darkie” Smith sits centre-right (AWM photograph, Accession number E05465. https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C971024)	81
Fig. 5.4	Edward Smith’s name is recorded on Homestead’s World War One Honour Board (Photograph supplied by Jeanette Curtis, Homestead, Queensland)	83
Fig. 5.5	The bodies of nine Australian soldiers laid to rest in mass grave Warloy (AWM image https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C130)	85

Fig. 5.6	The area around the village of Pozieres only months after the battle (AWM image https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C43223)	87
Fig. 6.1	Portrait of Captain Allen Charles Waters Kingston. Image in: Huntingdale, N. (2009). <i>Leane's Battalion: The History of the 48th Battalion A.I.F. 1916–1919</i>	97
Fig. 6.2	Motor Transport Section of AGD at Villers-Bretonneux, France, 1919 (AWM image https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C1371)	98
Fig. 6.3	Scattered Australian graves along OG1 twelve months after the battle (AWM image https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C43135)	100
Fig. 6.4	AGD's No. 5 Company at work in Villers-Bretonneux (AWM image https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C971051)	103
Fig. 6.5	AGS headquarters Villers-Bretonneux, France (AWM image https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C1226459)	105
Fig. 7.1	Private William Frampton McBeath (61661) circa December 1918	113
Fig. 7.2	Will at Richie Nicholls' grave Villers-Bretonneux, France	119
Fig. 7.3	Will's diary the week work commences with the AGD	121
Fig. 7.4	Will (3rd from right) with the YMCA tour party Versailles 14 June 1919	123
Fig. 7.5	Will's souvenir belt decorated with shrapnel, coins, and badges from France	124
Fig. 8.1	Australian Graves Detachment No. 1 Company. Grandfather of author Matt Smith—stands in the back row 8th position from the right (AWM image https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C971024)	130
Fig. 8.2	Australian 5th Brigade kit at the end of the war, found left on the ground two years after battle on 19 July, 1916 (AWM image https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C967694)	137
Fig. 8.3	Informal group portrait of unidentified AGD group (AWM image https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C970994)	140